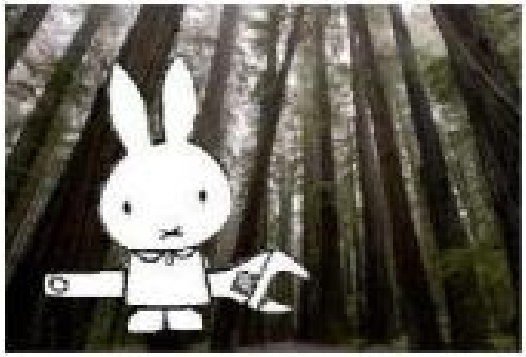
Miscellaneous direct action guides



Practical advice, tips, guides and resources to help you plan action as part of a variety of campaigns or struggles.

The advice here concerns small group actions whose use may be decided upon by a larger campaign or movement. Due to their nature these types of action are often best undertaken by affinity groups.

Affinity groups

Introductory articles on small-group direct action, with basic tips and information on structures like affinity groups.

Affinity groups: an introduction

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Affinity groups: an introduction

For many small group actions an 'affinity group' is the most effective organisational form.

This is a page of information about affinity groups, their structure, uses, history and advice.

What is an affinity group?

An affinity group is a small group of 5 to 20 people who work together autonomously on direct actions or other projects. You can form an affinity group with your friends, people from your community, workplace, or organisation.

Affinity groups challenge top-down decision-making and organising, and empower those involved to take creative direct action. Affinity groups allow

people to "be" the action they want to see by giving complete freedom and decision-making power to the affinity group.

Affinity groups by nature are decentralised and non-hierarchical, two important principles of anarchist organising and action. The affinity group model was first used by anarchists in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th century, and was re-introduced to radical direct action by anti-nuclear activists during the 1970s, who used decentralised non-violent direct action to blockade roads, occupy spaces and disrupt "business as usual" for the nuclear and war makers of the US. Affinity groups have a long and interesting past, owing much to the anarchists and workers of Spain and the anarchists and radicals today who use affinity groups, non-hierarchical structures, and consensus decision making in direct action and organising.

Affinity group roles [in a demonstration]

There are many roles that one could possibly fill. These roles include: *Medical* - An affinity group may want to have someone who is a trained street medic who can deal with any medical or health issues during the action.

Legal observer - If there are not already legal observers for an action, it may be important to have people not involved in the action taking notes on police conduct and possible violations of activists rights.

Media - If you are doing an action which plans to draw media, a person in the affinity group could be empowered to talk to the media and act as a spokesperson.

Action Elf/Vibes-watcher - This is someone who would help out with the general wellness of the group: water, massages, and encouragement through starting a song or cheer. This is not a role is necessary, but may be particularly helpful in day long actions where people might get

tired or irritable as the day wears on.

Traffic - If it is a moving affinity group, it may be necessary to have people who are empowered to stop cars at intersections and in general watch out for the safety of people on the streets from cars and other vehicles.

Arrest-able members - This depends on what kind of direct action you are doing.

Some actions may require a certain number of people willing to get arrested, or some parts of an action may need a minimum number of arrest-ables. Either way, it is important to know who is doing the action and plans on getting arrested.

Jail support - Again, this is only if you have an affinity group who has people getting arrested. This person has all the arrestees contact information and will go to the jail, talk to and work with lawyers, keep track of who got arrested etc.

Affinity groups are not just useful within a protest or direct action setting, this form of organisation can be used for a wide variety of purposes as the history of affinity groups below illustrates.

History of affinity groups

The idea of affinity groups comes out of the anarchist and workers movement that was created in the late 19th century and fought fascism in Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

The Spanish Anarchist movement provides an exhilarating example of a movement, and the actual possibility of a society based on decentralised organisation, direct democracy and the principles behind them.

Small circles of good friends, called "tertulias" would meet at cafes to discuss ideas and plan actions. In 1888, a period of intense class conflict in Europe and of local insurrection and struggle in Spain, the Anarchist Organisation of the Spanish Region made this traditional form (tertulias) the basis of its organisation.

Decades later, the Iberian Anarchist Federation, which contained 50,000 activists, organised into affinity groups and confederated into local, regional, and national councils. Wherever several FAI affinity groups existed, they formed a local federation. Local federations were coordinated by committees were made up of one mandated delegate from each affinity group.

Mandated delegates were sent from local federations to regional committees and finally to the Peninsular Committee. Affinity groups remained autonomous as they carried out education, organised and supported local struggles. The intimacy of the groups made police infiltration difficult.

The idea of large-scale affinity group based organisation was planted in the United States on April 30, 1977 when 2,500 people, organised into affinity groups, occupied the Seabrook, New Hampshire nuclear power plant. The growing anti-nuclear power and disarmament movements adopted this mode, and used it in many successful actions throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Since then, it has been used by the Central America solidarity movement, lesbian/gay liberation movement, Earth First! and earth liberation movement, and many others.

Most recently, affinity groups have been used in the mass actions in Seattle for

the WTO and Washington DC for the IMF and World Bank, as well as Philadelphia and Los Angles around the Republican and Democratic National Conventions.

What is a 'cluster' and a 'spokescouncil'?

A cluster is a grouping of affinity groups that come together to work on a certain task or part of a larger action. Thus, a cluster might be responsible for blockading an area, organising one day of a multi-day action, or putting together and performing a mass street theater performance. Clusters could be organised around where affinity groups are from (example:

Texas cluster), an issue or identity (examples: student cluster or anti-sweatshop cluster), or action interest (examples: street theater or [black bloc]).

A spokescouncil is the larger organising structure used in the affinity group model to coordinate a mass action. Each affinity group (or cluster) empowers a spoke (representative) to go to a spokescouncil meeting to decide on important issues for the action. For instance, affinity groups need to decide on a legal/jail strategy, possible tactical issues, meeting places, and many other logistics. A spokescouncil does not take away an individual affinity group's autonomy within an action; affinity groups make there own decisions about what they want to do on the streets.

How to start an affinity group

An affinity group could be a relationship among people that lasts for years among a group of friends and activists, or it could be a week long relationship based around a single action.

Either way, it is important to join an affinity group that is best suited to you and your interests.

If you are forming an affinity group in your city or town, find friends or fellow activists who have similar issue interests, and thus would want to go to similar actions. Also, look for people who would be willing to use similar tactics - if you want to do relatively high risk lockdowns, someone who does not want to be in that situation may not want to be in the affinity group. That person could do media or medic work, but it may not be best if they are completely uncomfortable around certain tactics of direct action.

If you are looking to join an affinity group at a mass action, first find out what affinity groups open to new members and which ones are closed. For many people, affinity groups are based on trusting relationships based around years of friendship and work, thus they might not want people they don't know in their affinity group. Once you find which affinity groups are open, look for ones that have an issue interest or action tactic that you are drawn to.

What can an affinity group do?

Anything! They can be used for mass or smaller scale actions. Affinity groups can be used to drop a banner, blockade a road, provide back-up for other affinity groups, do street theater, block traffic riding bikes, organise a tree sit, [confront the police, strategic property destruction], change the message on a massive billboard, play music in a radical marching band or sing in a revolutionary choir, etc. There can even be affinity groups who take on certain tasks in an action. For instance, there could be a roving affinity group made up of street medics, or an affinity group who brings food and water to people on the streets.

What makes affinity groups so effective for actions is that they can remain creative and independent and plan out their own action without an organisation or person dictating to them what can and can't be done. Thus, there are an endless amount of possibilities for what affinity groups can do. Be creative and remember: direct action gets the goods!

This text was taken and edited from Anarchism in Action by Shawn Ewald Edited by libcom.org. Last reviewed 2006

Small group direct action advice

This article explains some of the things to think about when planning an action. It's been written for smaller affinity group actions, rather than for mass street mobilisations. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide that has to be strictly followed, but more a list of things that might need to be sorted out for an action to happen successfully.

Pre-action

Aims and activity

What would you like the action to achieve? It may be education and agitation, economic damage, physical disruption, solidarity with others in struggle, or elements of all of these and more. It is best to clarify which is your priority. This helps identify the activity needed to achieve your aims.

You may decide on a banner drop, GM crop trashing, machine sabotage, office or site occupation, leafletting, propaganda production or something else completely.

Target

You may have a target in mind already. If so, think through whether it is possible to achieve the aims wanted with the activity you've decided upon.

When you have an idea of the aims, activity and target you have an outline plan. That is - you know what you want to achieve, and will do so by taking a certain type of action on a specific target.

When you have this you can move onto the first reconnaissance (recce) for the action.

Primary recce

Even if the action is to be done at night it may be best to make this first recce a daylight one.

Use it for gathering ‘hard information'. Get maps, photographs and plans of the target and the surrounding area. Look for likely drop off points for people, entrance and exit points from the target as well as escape routes. Also look for places for the driver to park up away from the target, or circular routes that could be driven whilst the action takes place.

Primary plan

After the first recce sit down with your fellow planners in a secure location and work out a basic plan. This should include a route to the target that is free of CCTV, a drop off or park up point, entrance point/s into the target, exit point/s and escape route/s.

It should be decided when the action will take place, what time of day or night, roughly how long each part will take (getting to the drop off point, drop off point to target, doing the action, re-grouping, getting back to the pick up point and getting away) and how many people will be needed. The plan should also include where the vehicle will be left/taken and possible routes there.

The plan should also involve communications. This includes who might need to communicate with who and how on the action. This might be between drivers and the people they have dropped off, lookouts and people on the action or a radio scanner monitor and everybody else.

Secondary recce

If the action is going to be at night make this second recce at night as well so as to familiarise yourself with the area in the dark. It may be possible to do both recces on the same day, and then have time for planning the action afterwards.

On this second recce look at the target in more depth. Pay particular attention to any security systems. Actually time the different stages of the action. Think about what tools you will need to do the job and what you will do with them afterwards. Check out the approach and escape routes in more detail, and also the vehicle park up/driving route for during the action.

They should all be CCTV-free and there should be alternatives in case of unpredictable circumstances such as cops, roadworks or other people parked up.

Check that the drop off and pick up points are away from buildings and lights, and there is space to turn a vehicle around. If the pick-up point is quite away from the target you may need to decide on a re-group point near the target so everyone leaves together.

Decide what communications equipment you will need and test that it works in the area.

Think about the likelihood of carrying away evidence on your clothes and look for places on the getaway route for dumping clothes and perhaps tools. Look for possible regroup points (perhaps a mile or so away) where people could meet up if the action goes wrong and everyone has to scatter.

Detailed action plan

This plan should fill out the basic plan with all the rest of the information needed to carry out the action. It should go from the point people meet to go on the action to the point people disperse at the end. It needs to include precise timings, which routes will be taken, what will be happening at each stage of the action, who will be communicating with who, what tools and other equipment will be needed, what will happen to the vehicle, and what roles need to be filled, e.g. driver, navigator, spotters etc.

The plan should also identify places to dump incriminating evidence as well as regroup point/s. If possible try and arrange to have a trusted person on the end of a phone, well away from the area the action is taking place in, who can be called in an emergency. It might be helpful if they had a large detailed map of the area to direct you if you ring up and are lost.

Use a secure mobile for this rather than a landline.

Back up plans

The back up plan/s should be done in the same way as the main action plan. Back ups could be alternative actions to do at the target selected, or new targets entirely.

Consideration should be given to the conditions in which the initial plan will be abandoned and how the decision to revert to a back up plan will be made and communicated to others.

Running through the plans

If possible everyone going on the action should be involved in talking through the plan and making any changes needed. Roles identified should be filled so everyone knows who is doing what. Decisions should be made about what to take (see box on ‘Checklist for Recces/Actions') and it should be established who is going to acquire the different items and bring them to the meeting point for the action. Everyone should make sure they have any mobile phone numbers or radio channels being used on the action. This is the point to identify any new skills the group will need to use and arrange to practice them in a ‘neutral'

setting rather than in the middle of an action.

Finally, people should decide how to organise themselves on the action. You could pair off in buddies or split into smaller groups. Doing this makes it easier to look after one another, move quickly and know if anyone is missing. Make sure everybody knows the names and addresses they will be using if arrested.

Action

Before going to the meeting point for the action, run through the checklist of what you will need and give yourself time to get it all together. Be on time to meet up so people aren't left suspiciously hanging around. It may be best to meet up at a neutral place rather than somebody's house or the centre of town.

Once on the way to the action, make sure everyone is clear about what they are doing. Try not to stop on the way unless you really have to, and remember that if you do have to stop most petrol stations and town centres have CCTV. All being well, you'll arrive at your

destination without incident. Put any disguises, such as hoods, masks or gloves, on at the last moment, as if you get pulled by the cops it's good to look straight.

If the action is taking place at night it's best not to use torches or internal car lights for around 20 minutes before you get dropped off. This allows your eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

Once the action starts try to keep focussed on what you are doing, but aware of where others are and what is going on around you. It's important to follow the communication structures you have decided on, e.g. making sure you are in earshot/sight of each other if you need to pass a message on/check everyone is there. Everyone should have a watch that has been synchronised beforehand, so at the designated finishing time for the action people know to regroup and get ready to leave. If there is no finish time maybe have an easily identifiable signal.

Get together at the re-group point and check everybody is there and okay. This is easier to do if everybody has teamed up into buddy pairs before the action and then sticks together and keeps an eye on each other. If people are missing try and find out what has happened to them.

Depending on the type of action and what happened this may be a point where you want to destroy any incriminating evidence.

If the action doesn't go according to plan and people are forced to scatter, try to stay with your buddy or group, move fast and keep in mind the direction you are

going. If it's taking place at night you can very easily get disorientated and lost, so before the action have a look at the map and get a clear idea of what direction and where you could head to if this happens.

The most important thing is to not panic. Remember that many people have got out of the most pear-shaped situations by having a clear head and a grim determination not to be caught!

If it's possible get to the pre-arranged meeting point. If that's not an option get out of the area as quickly as you can, and ring the emergency mobile as soon as it is safe to do so so people know you're okay.

Post-action

Debrief

Try and have a meeting of all those that were on the action to discuss how the planning and execution of it went. Think about what was good and bad and try and learn lessons for the next action. This is best done in the first few days after before memories get fuzzy and important details are forgotten.

Mutual aid

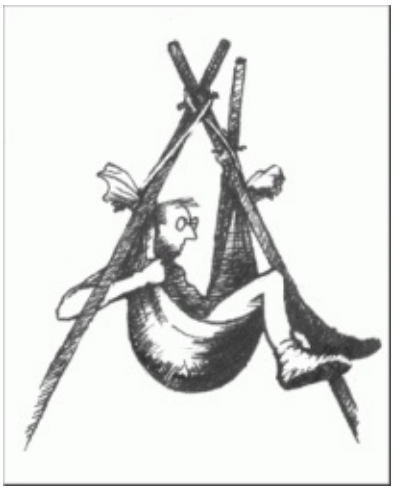
Look after yourself and one another. Don't pressure people to go on actions if they are tired or stressed out. Take time out to relax and don't get into ‘the struggle is my life' martyrdom headspace. Address problems and power relations within the group. In the longer term make an effort to learn skills that only one or two people have. This stops them being put under unnecessary pressure, and ensures a balance of responsibility.

Security

Don't let your security slacken because the action is in the past. The cops have longer memories than we do and if your action is considered serious by the state an investigation into it can continue for months - or even years.

Political understanding

Analyse the tactical and strategic impact of your actions. Are there better targets or ways of



operating? Read our history and learn from current and past struggles, movements and groups.

Communication

It is sometimes useful to communicate to other people what you have done. Maybe write a short article reporting the action for SchNEWS, Earth First! Action Update and other newsletters. Consider issuing an anonymous press release/communiqué to other media. These could be done through an anonymous web based email service set up for this purpose and then only used once. Maybe produce flyposters or stickers about the action and put them up around your local area and send them to other groups. If useful lessons were learnt from the action let other people know by writing a leaflet, discussion document or article.

Broadening the struggle

Help facilitate other people's involvement in the resistance. If you have a closed cell/group help interested people set up another group. If you work in an open group let people know what you are doing and how they can get involved. Doing stalls and printing leaflets with your contact details on are two ways of doing this. Continue with your own activity!.

Taken and edited by libcom from Do or Die

Scaffold tripods guide

In our blockading guide we cover many ways of defending territory. This page goes into more detail about setting up scaffolds which can be used to effectively block roads or small throughways such as factory entrances.

For your basic Tripod, acquire: 3 scaff-poles, about 25 feet long 2 swivelling scaff-clips

Rope (cheap blue poly-prop available from the local hardware shop is fine)Spanner to tighten scaff clip

A Spanner is needed for the nuts on the clips. You also need a fairly large (high if indoors) space for fixing them, experimenting and practising.

It's tricky to get the clips fitted on so that the poles can be held parallel (for carrying etc.) and at the same time be in the right position to erect as a tripod.

The main assembly is formed by securing two poles in an 'A' Shape and using a third to prop the two up.

The securing clip for the third pole has to be about a foot below the 'A ' shape clip, this allows the main poles to close over it in the folded position. This clip should be mounted at roughly 120 degrees in relation to the main clip in order to swivel open correctly.

With a little experimentation you will find where to place the clips so that the poles lie parallel for transport yet are easily opened into a tripod.

You will probably need at least 5 people to erect a tripod made with steel poles: At least one strong person to lift each of the two main legs by walking down beneath it from apex to base;

one person to do the same with the third leg and at a crucial moment, to swing this leg out and to prop up the 'A';

and one person with their foot braced against the base of each main pole to stop it skidding forward.

With aluminium poles the job is easier, demanding only 3 people.

Once the tripod is erected, at least one person must shin up the pole at the speed of light in order to be out of reach at the top.

A simple circumference rope tying the poles together about three feet from the top can be fixed prior to erection if desired and used to take the weight of up to three people.

A simple hammock sling is more comfortable and stylish. It's made out of a length of strong light material, such as rip stop nylon, knotted at either end, with the two ends of a short rope tied securely just inside these knots. The rope can be slung over your shoulders as you shin up the poles, and when you reach the top simply slipped over the poles making your stay much more comfortable.

For extra stability and a convivial number at the top, three short horizontal poles with clips can be used as braces. Leave each short pole dangling from one of its clips until the tripod is up, then do up the second clip.

Before climbing remember to take the spanner - you may not have a second chance to get up with it.

A climbing harness and slings make this job easier.

This augmented tripod will be heavier and may require a greater number of people to lift it.

A tripod lacking these bars can be stabilised using a circumference rope linking the legs a couple of feet above the ground. This will secure against collapse due to accidental slippage, but not against attack. Car exhaust clips are useful to stop the ropes riding up.

Hot tip

Painting "L", "R" and "M" on the poles near the bottom, so it's easily visible
Subvertising billboards

A guide to subvertising - altering commercial outdoor poster and billboard advertisements to get your message across.

The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement

a comprehensive guide to the alteration of outdoor advertising Introduction

Look up! Billboards have become as ubiquitous as human suffering, as difficult to ignore as a beggar's outstretched fist. Every time you leave your couch or cubicle, momentarily severing the electronic umbilicus, you enter the realm of their impressions. Larger than life, subtle as war, they assault your senses with a complex coda of commercial instructions, the messenger RNA of capitalism. Every time you get in a car, or ride a bus, or witness a sporting event, you receive their instructions. You can't run and you can't hide, because your getaway route is lined to the horizon with signs, and your hidey-hole has a panoramic view of an 8-sheet poster panel.

There are a million stories in the Big City, and as many reasons to want to hack a billboard.

We have our reasons, and we don't presume to judge yours. In this manual, we have made a conscious effort to steer clear of ideology and stick to methodology. The procedures outlined here are based on our 20+ years' experience executing billboard improvements professional-ly, safely, and (knock wood) without injury or arrest. In most cases, is should not be necessary to follow the elaborate, even obsessive precautions we outline here. A can of spray paint, a blithe spirit, and a balmy night are all your really need.

- Blank DeCoverly

BLF Information Systems

1) Selecting a Billboard

In choosing a sign, keep in mind that the most effective alterations are often the simplest. If you can totally change the meaning of an advertisement by changing one or two letters, you'll save a lot of time and trouble. Some ads lend themselves to parody by the inclusion of a small image or symbol in the appropriate place (a skull, radiation symbol, happy face, swastika, vibrator, etc.). On other boards, the addition of a cartoon "thought bubble" or "speech bal-loon" for one of the characters might be all that is needed.

Once you have identified a billboard message you wish to improve, you may want to see if there are multiple locations displaying the same advertisement. You should determine which ones give your message optimum visibility. A board on a central freeway will obviously give you more exposure than one on an obscure side street. You must then weigh the location/visibility factor with other crucial variables such as physical accessibility, potential escape routes, volume of foot and vehicular traffic during optimum alteration hours, etc. Of course, if you can improve more than one board in the same campaign, so much the better.

There are several standard sign types in the outdoor advertising industry. Knowing which type of sign you are about to alter may prove useful in planning the operation: Bulletins are large outdoor sign structures, typically situated alongside federal highways and major urban freeways. They measure 14 x 48 feet and are usually leased in multi-month con-tracts, meaning that an advertisement will stay in place for at least 60 days.

30-Sheet Poster Panels measure 12 x 25 feet, are situated along primary and secondary road-ways, and are usually updated every 30 days.

8-Sheet Poster Panels measure 6 x 12 feet and are usually found in high-density urban neighborhoods and suburban shopping areas. They are designed to reach both pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and are leased in 30-day increments.

Out-of-Home Media is the industry term for advertising targeted at people on the go, including bus shelters, bus exterior s, taxis, subway stations, street furniture (newsstands, benches, kiosks), painted walls, and "indoor out of home" locations like airports and malls.

There are of course many non-standard formats as well, and these frequently make the most intriguing targets. Oversized bulletins, animated signs, painted

buildings, and boards with neon all offer unique challenges for advanced operations. Signs featuring large, illuminated text can often be improved simply by turning off a few letters, converting 'HILLSDALE" to

"LSD," for instance, or "HOTEL ESSEX" to "HOT SEX." The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

2) Planning the Improvement Action

Though the sudden urge to just climb right up a sign and start hacking can occasionally be overwhelming, in our experience this type of "impulse improvement" tends to deliver unsatis-factory results, at unnecessary personal risk. The guidelines that follow draw on the BLF's proud 20-year history of planning and executing such actions without injury or arrest.

A) Accessibility

How do you get up on the board? Will you need your own ladder to reach the bottom of the board's ladder? Can you climb the support structure? Is the board on a building rooftop, and if so, can it be reached from within the building, from a fire escape, or perhaps from an adjoin-ing building? If you need ladders to work the board, they may occasionally be found on platforms on or behind the board, or on adjacent boards or rooftops.

B) Practicality

How big are the letters and/or images you would like to change? How close to the platform at the bottom of the board is your work area? On larger boards you can rig from above and hang over the face to reach points that are too high to reach from below. We don't recommend this method unless you have some climbing and rigging experience. When hanging in one position your work area is very limited laterally. Your ability to leave the scene quickly diminish-es proportionately to how convoluted your position has become. Placing huge words or images is much more difficult.

C) Security After choosing your board, be sure to inspect it, both during the day and at night.

Take note of all activities in the area. Who is about at 2:00 a.m.? How visible will you be while scaling the support structure? Keep in mind you will make

noise; are there any apart-ment or office windows nearby? Is anyone home? Walk lightly if you're on a rooftop-who knows who you're walking over.

What is the visibility to passing cars on surface streets and freeways? What can you see from your work position on the board? Even though it is very difficult to see a figure on a dark board at night, it is not impossible. Any point you have line-of-sight vision to is a point from which you can be observed. How close is your board to the nearest police station or Highway Patrol headquarters? What is their patrol pattern in the area? Average response time to Joe Citizen's call? You can get an idea by staking out the area and observing. Is it quiet at night or is there a lot of foot traffic? When the bars let out, will this provide cover-i.e., drunks keeping the cops busy-or will it increase the likelihood of detection by passersby? Do they care? If you are definitely spotted, it may pay to have your ground crew approach them rather than just hoping they don't call the cops. Do not let them connect you with a vehicle. Have your ground crew pretend to be chance passersby and find out what the observer thinks.

We've been spotted at work a number of times and most people were amused. You'll find that most people, including officials, don't look up unless given a reason to do so.

Go up on the board prior to your hit. Get a feeling for being there and moving around on the structure at night. Bring a camera-it's a good cover for doing anything you're not supposed to:

"Gee, officer, I'm a night photographer, and there's a great shot of the bridge from up here . . .

" Check your escape routes. Can you cross over rooftops and leave by a fire escape across the block? etc., etc.

D) Illumination

Most boards are brightly lit by floodlights of some type. Most large boards are shut off some time between 11:00 p.m. and 2:00 am by a time clock control somewhere on or near the board. Smaller boards frequently are controlled by photo-electric cells or conventional timeclocks, also somewhere on the board. If you find the photo-electric cell, you can turn the lights on the board off by taping a small flashlight directly into the cell's "eye." This fools the unit into thinking it's daytime and shutting the lights off.

As noted, most larger boards are controlled by timeclocks. These can be found in the control panels at the base of the support structure and/or behind the board itself. These panels are often locked (particularly those at the structure's base). Unless you are familiar with energized electrical circuitry and devices of this type we caution you to wait until the clock shuts itself off at midnight or so. Many of these boards run 220 volts and could fry you to a crisp.

E) Daytime Hits

We don't recommend this method for most high boards on or near freeways and major roads.

It works well for doing smaller boards lower to the ground where the alteration is relatively quick and simple. If you do choose to work in the light, wear coveralls (company name on

the back?) and painters' hats, and work quickly. Keep an eye out for parked or passing vehicles bearing the billboard company's or advertiser's name. Each board has the company em-blem at its bottom center. If you're on a Sleaze Co. board and a Sleaze Co. truck pulls up, you're probably in trouble. It is unlikely that the workers will try to physically detain you (try bribery if necessary), but they will probably call the cops.

3) Producing Graphical Overlays

Though powerful improvements are occasionally executed with nothing more than a spray can and a sharp wit, most actions require the production of some type of graphical overlay to alter the board's message. The more professional-looking these overlays, the greater impact your modified ad is likely to have on the public. This is not to say that every hit needs to look exactly like an original - this would be prohibitively expensive for most groups, and in these days of computer-assisted photo enhancement, could arguably lead to the accusation that your hit was a binary illusion, crafted on a Macintosh rather than on the urban landscape.

While technical competence is a worthy goal to pursue (and a major motivator for the BLF), the success or failure of your alteration will ultimately depend more on the quality of your thinking and the power of your altered message than on how well you can match a font.

A) Choosing a Production Method

Before you get too deep into the design process, you need to decide how the overlays will be produced. If you're lucky enough to have access to commercial sign-printing equipment, you can go the professional route and opt for industry-standard vinyl. Vinyl overlays are strong, light, easy to transport, and easy to apply, but unless you have an industry insider on your team, they will probably be too expensive to produce. If you or a collaborator have late-night access to the facilities of a commercial printer, neighborhood copy shop, or advertising bu-reau, you may be able to output your overlays on a large-format color printer or plotter. The venerable LaserMaster, with its sturdy coated paper and 36-inch track, is a BLF favorite, but there are many other models in the field.

Printing on paper nearly always requires a process known as "tiling" - cutting the image up into smaller pieces that are then reassembled into a whole. Popular computer programs like Quark Xpress and Adobe PageMaker can perform this function automatically, by selecting the "Tiling" option from the Print menu. If you don't have access to a wide-track printer, try to locate a machine that can handle 11x17 tabloid-sized paper - the bigger your printer's output, the fewer pieces you'll have to tile back together to create a finished overlay. Most neighborhood copy shops and many corporate offices now have color printers/copiers with 11x17 output.

For low cost and maximum durability, consider canvas. When impregnated with oil-based lacquer paint, a canvas overlay has the potential to last longer than the sign surface it's affixed to. It's heavier to carrier and more difficult to secure to the sign, but it's a reliable, low-tech alternative that can be implemented inexpensively.

We don't recommend using overlays much larger than 4'x3'. If your message is larger, you should section it and butt the sections together for the finished image. It gets very windy on boards, and large paste-overs are difficult to apply.

B) Scale

If you are changing only a small area (one letter, a small symbol, etc.) you probably do not need to go to any elaborate lengths to match or design your "overlay" (we'll use this term to describe the finished image/lettering you'll be applying to the board). Just take actual measurements or tracings directly off the

board. If, however, you intend to create overlays of great size and/or number of letters and you want the finished image to look as much as possible like the advertisers themselves had made it, you should plan on more elaborate preparation.

Find a position roughly level with the board and looking at it square on (200 to 1000 or so feet away). Photograph the board from this position and make a tracing from a large print of the photo. Using measurements you have taken on the board (height, width, letter height, etc.), you can create a scale drawing of your intended alteration. From this, it is possible to determine how large your overlays will need to be and what spacing will be required between letters.

C) Color Matching

There are two basic ways to match the background and/or colors of the lettering or image ar-ea:

On painted or paper boards you can usually carve a small (1"x1") sample directly off the board. This does not always work on older painted boards which have many thick layers of paint.

Most large paint stores carry small paint sampler books. It is possible to get a pretty close match from these samplers. We suggest sticking to solid colors and relatively simple designs for maximum visual impact.

D) Letter Style

If you wish to match a letter style exactly, pick up a book of fonts from a graphic arts store or borrow one from a self-serve print shop. Use this in conjunction with tracings of existing letters to create the complete range of lettering needed for your alteration. You can convincingly fake letters that aren't on the board by finding a closely matching letter style in the book and using tracings of letters from your photo of the board as a guide for drawing the new letters.

E) Producing Overlays From Computer Output

Computers with desktop publishing software offer many advantages to the modern billboard liberator. Fonts and colors can be matched precisely, professional-looking graphical elements can be added to your text message, and scale and spacing become much easier to calculate.

There are many software packages suitable for producing overlays, including PageMaker, Quark Xpress, Illustrator, Freehand, CorelDraw, and various CAD programs. Adobe Pho-toshop gives you the additional flexibility of being able to preview your hit - just scan in a photograph of the original board and apply your modification over it as an independent layer.

After you have designed the overlay and printed out your tiles, you'll need to assemble the individual printouts jigsaw-style and glue them onto some sort of backing material. Heavy pattern paper works best for this, but you can also use 1/8-inch foamcore for smaller overlays, i.e. those less than 30 inches on a side. Start in one corner, adhering the first tile with spray adhesive to the backing material. Carefully assemble the rest of the tiles, trimming off unprinted margin space as required and laying them down one at a time, making sure all the edges are well-secured. If you get a little off-kilter at some point in the process and the pieces don't line up with absolute precision, don't worry - large-scale work is more forgiving since people will be viewing it at a distance. When all the tiles are secured, reinforce the edges with clear packing tape. If it's going to be a wet night, or if there's a chance your work may stay up for a few days or more, consider weather-proofing your overlay with a coat of clear lacquer.

F) Tiling With a Photocopier

If you don't have access to a computer with desktop publishing software, but do have access to a good copy machine, you can duplicate the procedure described above using the copier's

"enlarge" function. First, create a scale original of your overlay on a single sheet of paper, using stencils or rub-off lettering. Next, pencil a grid over your drawing, with each square being equivalent to the largest size of paper the copier can accommodate (letter, legal, tabloid, etc.). Cut the original into pieces along the penciled lines, then enlarge each piece on the copier, going through as many generations as necessary until each piece fills its own sheet of

paper. Assemble the pieces as described above, adding color with lacquer paints or permanent markers. Weatherproof if desired.

G) Producing Overlays by Hand

We recommend using heavy pattern paper and high-gloss, oil-based lacquer paints. The lacquer paint suffuses the paper, making it super-tough, water

resistant, and difficult to tear. For making overlays, roller coat the background and spray paint the lettering through cardboard cut-out templates of the letters. For extremely large images or panels, use large pieces of painted canvas. The canvas should be fairly heavy to avoid being ripped to shreds by the winds that buffet most billboards. Glue and staple 1"x4" pine boards the entire horizontal lengths of the top and bottom of the canvas. The canvas will then roll up like a carpet for transportation and can be unrolled over the top of the board and lowered into place by ropes.

H) Methods of Application

Although there are many types of adhesive that can be used, we recommend rubber cement.

Rubber cement is easily removable (but if properly applied will stay up indefinitely) and does not damage or permanently mark the board's surface. This may become important if you're apprehended and the authorities and owners attempt to assess property damage. Application of rubber cement on large overlays is tricky. You need to evenly coat both the back-side of the overlay and the surface of the board that is to be covered. Allow one to two minutes dry-ing time before applying the paper to the board. To apply the cement, use full sized (10") house paint rollers and a five-gallon plastic bucket. Have one person coat the back of the overlays while another coats the board's surface. Both people will be needed to affix the coated overlay to the finished board surface. On cool nights there may be condensation on the board, in which case the area to be covered needs to be wiped down first - use shop towels or a chamois for this.

To level overlay panels on the board, measure up from the bottom (or down from the top) of the board to the bottom line of where it needs to be in order to cover the existing copy. Make small marks at the outermost left and right-hand points. Using a chalk snap line with two people, snap a horizontal line between these two points. This line is your marker for placing your overlay(s).

If you have a canvas or paper overlay as described in (F) above, you can either tie the four corners and middle (top and bottom) very securely, or, if you can reach the face of the board by ladder or rope, attach the panel by screwing the 1"x4" boards to the billboard. A good bat-tery powered drill is needed for this. We recommend hex-head "Tek" sheet metal screws, #8

or #10 size. Use a hex head driver bit for your drill. These screws work well on either wood backboards or sheet metal.

4) Executing the Hit

Once you've completed your preparations and are ready for the actual hit, there are many things which can be done to minimize the risk of apprehension and/or injury: *A) Personnel*

Have the smallest number of people possible on the board. Three is about optimum-two for the actual work and one lookout/communications person. Depending on your location, you may require additional spotting personnel on the ground (see below).

B) Communications

For work on larger boards where you're exposed for longer periods of time, we recommend compact CB units or FM-band walkie-talkies. Low cost CB walkie-talkies are available from Radio Shack and elsewhere, and can can fitted with headsets and microphones for ease of use.

Have one or two cars positioned at crucial intersections within sight of the board. The ground crew should monitor oncoming traffic and maintain radio contact with the lookout on the board. (Note: Do not use the popular CB or FM channels; there are many other frequencies to choose from. A verbal code is a good idea since the channels you will be using will not be secure.)

It's crucial that the ground crew don't lounge around their vehicle(s) or in any other way make it obvious that they're hanging around in a (likely) desolate area late at night for no apparent reason. A passing patrol car will notice them much sooner than they will notice operatives on the board. Keep a low profile. We've found that lookouts dressed as winos, or as homeless couples, are virtually invisible additions to the urban landscape. Park all vehicles out of sight of the operation.

C) Safety

The risk of apprehension on a board pales in comparison to the risk of falling, and safety concerns should always prevail over security. If you're not an experienced climber, you're better off helping out on the ground: as a security

lookout, graphic designer or publicist. Even if you are an experienced climber, we don't recommend solo actions on any board larger than 8 panels (6x12 feet). Ideally, all field actions should incorporate the buddy system, but particularly those that require any sort of rigging. If you're going to lean over the top of the board to affix any overlays, you should have a secured partner belaying you. It's a long way down, so be careful up there.

D) Clean-up

Billboard structures are notorious trash magnets as it is; don't make matters worse by leaving your empty glue tubes, discarded vinyl backing, cigarette butts and empties on the property.

The responsible billboard liberator leaves nothing of his own behind (not even fingerprints), though he may on occasion leave a cold six-pack for the benefit of those hard-working sign-men assigned to the unglamorous task of un-altering his alteration.

E) Escape

If you've done your homework, you'll know the terrain surrounding the board quite well. In the event of detection, prepare a number of alternate routes out of the area, and a rendezvous point with the ground support crew. If a patrol is approaching and you are in a difficult spot for quickly ditching and hiding (hanging on a rope in the middle of the board, for instance), it may be better simply to stay still until they pass. Movement is more likely to catch the eye.

Once on the ground, if pursuit is imminent, hiding may be your safest bet. If you've covered the terrain carefully, you'll be aware of any good hiding spots. Keep in mind that if the police do a thorough search (doubtful, but not impossible), they will use high-powered spotlights from cars and flashlights if on foot.

Stashed clothing in your hiding spot may prove useful. A business suit, perhaps, or rumpled and vomit-encrusted leisure wear. Be creative.

4) Publicizing Your Action

Like the advertisements they improve, your actions should aim for the greatest possible reach. Try to time your improvement so it stays up for as long as

possible, and generates the greatest possible number of "impressions." Actions executed at the beginning of a holiday weekend tend to stay up longest, since repair crews are less readily available. Yet even if your improvement survives for two or three days on a major urban thoroughfare, it won't at-tain the kind of reach you can get with media attention.

A) Photographs

Color slides are best for magazine and newspaper submissions, but online publishers prefer high-resolution .jpeg files. Be sure to get a good "before" picture of the board to be altered, ideally taken from the same camera position and at the same time of day (or night) as the "after" photograph. An "after" picture should be taken as soon as possible after the action is completed; if you want a daytime shot as well, come back for it later.

B) Press Releases

May be serious or surreal, according to your motives and whim. Basically a cover letter for your photographs, which comprise the essence of the story. Most libraries carry one of the major PR reference guides, which list contacts for every printed publication and broadcast company in the country (while you're there, research standard AP style for press releases).

Better yet, record your manifesto on an audio cassette or CD, then tape it to the bottom of a payphone outside a reporter's office and call in your "anonymous tip." The more creative you are, the more likely you are to get the desired response.

Postscript

If anyone reading this primer finds it of any use in their own advertising endeavors, we at the BLF will consider it successful. We believe roadside advertising enhancement is a pastime more individuals should engage in. It's not that difficult to do smaller, low-to-the-ground boards. A quick hit-and-run on such a board will not require all of the elaborate preparations and precautions we have detailed. The more "real" messages we have on the freeways and streets, the better.

- R.O. Thornhill

BLF Education Officer

- Blank DeCoverly

BLF Minister of Propaganda

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